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Title: Straight from the farm - Programs supply season of vegetables for upfront fee
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Last year was the first that McClain's family participated in a direct-delivery program in which customers pay an upfront fee to receive fresh vegetables throughout the growing season.

It's called community-supported agriculture, or CSA, and while signing up for a season of produce can be pricier than a typical grocery, it comes with plenty of feel-good features. Knowing the person growing your food is one, but the movement also pitches benefits that range from supporting local agriculture to reducing energy dependency and carbon emissions by shortening the trip from farm to consumer.

Consumers also take the risk that if a crop goes bad, they don't get their money back. But when groceries were pulling potentially tainted spinach off their shelves last year, McClain said she was confident her food was safe -- and that outweighed other risks.

"It was fresh. It was flavorful," she said. "I didn't have to worry about, 'Is this going to cause me to get sick? Is it going to cause my family to get sick?'

"And that convinced me" to sign up again this year, she said.

Kentucky has about 15 to 20 community-supported agriculture programs -- typically catering to about 50 to 75 customers each, said Tim Woods, a University of Kentucky horticulture marketing professor. A decade ago, he said, there were two.

They cater to urban areas such as Louisville, Lexington and Nashville, Tenn., where they

can find customers willing to pay a little more for the perceived benefits.

Twenty weeks of fresh produce can cost $500, which at $25 per week -- is "on the high end of what most people would be spending" at a grocery, Woods said.

The programs generally rely on customers to pick up their produce at a central site in the urban area where the farmer meets them. In some cases, customers volunteer at the farms and prefer to pick up their produce there.

Kathleen Brocious, who runs Tenacity Farm in Campbellsburg, said she aims for 22 to 25 delivery weeks a year, starting with cool-weather crops. Planting stops in September, and the last delivery is as late in October as possible, she said.

Last week's list included asparagus, radishes, sugar snaps, romaine lettuce, spinach, turnip greens, mustard greens and kale.

The programs differ from the popular farmers' markets because customers pay upfront, creating a financial bond to the farm.

Growth of the movement

Woods said he believes the markets "may have stirred the pot" for fresh produce, but he believes the CSAs are a separate phenomenon.

It's a phenomenon that started in Massachusetts in 1986 and grew to 60 U.S. farms four years later. By 2005, the country had more than 1,150 CSAs, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data cited by Woods.

Woods said the programs aren't a threat to groceries -- and he doesn't expect chains to establish their own CSAs to compete in the same way that they did by creating organic food sections.

"But it continues to grow in popularity," he said.

And Deborah Webb, director of Community Farm Alliance, which promotes Kentucky farm products and lobbies for farmers in the state legislature, said she believes Woods' estimate on the number of such programs in Kentucky may be low, but tracking them is difficult.

"They come and they go, but they're important," she said, because they provide an alternative to industrial food production and allow small farmers to start or continue farming.

Farm Alliance board member Adam Barr just bought 2½ acres of his family's Meade County farm and started a community-supported program after having interned at two such operations previously. He said he has one customer in Brandenburg and 10 in Louisville.

The model, he said, makes more sense than relying on the unpredictability of the market price. "It's a lot more stable farm model," he said.

Although he's also a substitute teacher, Barr said he'd like to be a full-time farmer using the

support program as the "backbone" of the operation. He said he could have had twice as many customers this year -- "I have a waiting list" -- but didn't want to overcommit in his first effort.

McClain, meanwhile, buys from Brocious, who delivers weekly at a Crescent Hill church parking lot.

Her farm boasts Certified Naturally Grown produce, an alternative to the USDA's "organic" designation, which small farmers complain is too expensive and cumbersome to obtain. Certified Naturally Grown is a private nonprofit that claims its requirements are no less strict than the USDA's.

Brocious, in her sixth season with a community-supported program, said working as a small farmer provides her with a "very spiritual connection to the earth and (there's) just something magical about when you plant things and something grows and you nurture it."

Both she and her husband, Bob, who works at UPS, grew up in Florida and have lived in Kentucky since 1985.

In the mid-1990s, she said, Bob felt a calling to move to a rural area, which led to her becoming a full-time farmer on the 134-acre Tenacity Farm, part of which she devotes to the CSA.

Running a CSA

She said she enjoys establishing relationships with people and knowing that what she grows goes directly from the field to a family. Most everything is harvested on the day it is delivered, she said, and shareholders can visit the farm throughout the growing season.

"It's an open-door, open-farm policy … you can come and see and by all means do," she said.

Brocious said she places her seed order in January and notifies past and potential customers -- who've contacted her from word-of-mouth referrals or from her information on localharvest.org, a Web site that lists organic and local food sources around the country by ZIP code and state.

Brocious said she's at capacity with 16 shares for 25 families (some of the families split the cost of a share)."This is what's manageable for me. … I don't have any help other than my husband and my son occasionally," she said. "I don't have to advertise."

Customers are asked to register in March and have everything paid by the first delivery in mid-May. Full shares are $500 a season, with smaller shares at $350 a year.

McClain, of Jeffersonville, Ind., splits a $500 share with Highlands resident Karen Grantz. Their husbands work together.

Grantz said a supply of vegetables from a known source became more important to her and her husband after the birth of their 15-month-old daughter, Emily.

"I think it costs less" than buying organic at the grocery, Grantz said, and "for us, it ensures that we have it in the house, where we might not buy it every week at the grocery. … It's also introduced me to a lot of vegetables (like kale) I never knew how to cook."

Grantz said she would support community farmers and small farms even if -- in a worst-case scenario poor season -- she received nothing.

"Part of it is you're assuming some of the risk," Grantz said. "If she has a bad crop, you may not get as much of one thing or another, but that's OK. I mean we got amazing fresh lettuce last year."

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